

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

U.S. War Intelligence Called Faulty

By
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The United States cannot afford to wait until Gen. William Westmoreland's delayed departure from Vietnam next July to repair his failures. Here are problems that need immediate attention:

INTELLIGENCE GAP — It is now clear that our policy makers have been basing their war plans upon faulty intelligence. Before the Communist Tet offensive, Secretary of State Rusk justified his hawkish views by showing intimates a confidential report from Saigon. We have now obtained a copy of this pre-Tet document. It's amazing in its errors, yet it had great influence on Rusk's thinking.

"We have mounting evidence that the Southern-born enemy is rapidly losing heart for the war," declared the report. "Once the enemy was able to recruit about 7000 men per month from the population. Now we believe fewer than 3500 are recruited; and many of these are boys 14 and 15 years of age. Women are also being recruited where

possible in order to release more men to combat.

"No doubt the enemy is trying to offset his recruiting deficiency in the South by increasing his rate of infiltration from the North. While we do not know just how successful he is, we believe he has not sent South enough men to offset his losses during the past several months. We believe the tide has turned and the enemy strength is on the decline. There is evidence of faltering morale and discipline among the Southern enemy — the true Vietcong. There are fewer but significant signs that the Northern invader is likewise weakening."

The Tet lunar offensive proved just the opposite. Last November we reported that Westmoreland's former intelligence chief, Maj. Gen. Joseph Alexander McChristian, was transferred to Ft. Hood, Tex., because his bosses in the Pentagon didn't like his pessimistic estimates of Communist infiltration and recruitment. They preferred to believe lower, more comfortable estimates of enemy strength.

The Air Force, in particular, disputed McChristian's figures, because they implied that Air Force bombing was not slowing down the infiltration from the north.

Today intelligence experts generally agree that McChristian was right, that the official figures underestimated enemy

strength by as much as 130,000.

STRATEGIC GAP — Westmoreland has relied largely upon conventional strategy to defeat an enemy who has refused to fight according to the rules laid out in the West Point textbooks. Many observers feel that the United States might have done better if Westmoreland had forgotten all he learned in World War II and studied the Indian wars instead.

More and more, our troops find themselves operating from fortified strongholds into hostile country, just as the cavalry did in Sitting Bull's day. The parallel is heightened by the Marines at Khesanh, who must know how Custer's troops felt at the Little Big Horn.

At Khesanh the Marines find themselves crowded into a bull's-eye, pounded from all sides by Communist artillery. Trained as a shock force, to be used in offensive situations, the Marines haven't done an adequate job of digging in for defensive trench warfare.

In the Mekong Delta, meanwhile, Army units trained for foxhole fighting are being used in amphibious assaults against the fleeing guerrillas in the swamps. They should have been at Khesanh, and the Marines in the Delta.

The South Vietnamese army has also been organized by its American advisors in the image of the U.S. Army,

trained to fight a conventional war. Westmoreland has largely ignored pleas that the South Vietnamese be retrained and re-equipped to fight guerrillas. He has given only nominal support to his own counterinsurgency forces, which know how to fight Vietcong-style warfare.

MANPOWER GAP — When Westmoreland took command of our forces in Vietnam in August, 1964, the U.S. role was limited almost entirely to advising the South Vietnamese army. Our troop commitment was then only 27,000 men. At his urging, there has been a continuing increase in American participation. The troop strength is now close to 600,000 men.

Of these 600,000, only 65,000 to 100,000 men are in combat. The rest are behind desks or in garages and storehouses—a bureaucracy of half a million men.

Westmoreland's decisions have been dictated, in part, by President Johnson. The general ruefully refers to the heat from the White House as "the blowtorch." LBJ has shown his gratitude by appointing Westmoreland to be the next Army Chief of Staff, which, though a kick upstairs, is nevertheless a promotion.

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Drew Pearson will report on a whisper campaign against President Johnson in his broadcast with Jack Anderson over Radio WTOP today at 6:40 p.m.